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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000985

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/04/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: ICRC HOSTAGE: 100 DAYS AND COUNTING

REF: A. MANILA 902 (SEARCH FOR LAST RED CROSS HOSTAGE
CONTINUES)
[1](#)B. MANILA 829 (SWISS HOSTAGE GAINS FREEDOM)
[1](#)C. MANILA 812 (HOSTAGES: PURSUING NEGOTIATIONS BUT
PREPARING FOR WORST)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Fully 100 days after the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) kidnapped three International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) workers on Jolo island January 15, Italian national Eugenio Vagni remains captive, despite ongoing efforts to negotiate the release of the injured and ailing 62-year-old Red Cross worker. Filipina ICRC worker Mary Jean Lacaba was released on April 2, and Swiss national Andreas Notter was abandoned by his captors during a night move on April 17. Vagni reportedly suffers from a hernia and hypertension and may not be able to walk. According to the ICRC and media sources, Vagni last spoke with his family by phone on April 30. The ASG have not demanded a cash ransom but have called for Philippine armed forces to withdraw from Jolo Island and for Vice President Noli de Castro and other politicians to be part of the negotiations for his release. The Jolo Governor has authorized the military to attempt a rescue, but Vagni's medical condition, combined with the rugged terrain and inclement weather, complicates the planning for such an attempt. The ASG's motives in continuing to hold Mr. Vagni captive are not clear, but should his health deteriorate further he may become more of a liability to them than an asset. END SUMMARY

MILITARY OPTION IS COMPLICATED

[1](#)2. (C) Undersecretary of Defense Alberto Valenzuela told visiting EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel May 4 that the Philippine military continues to have the lead in dealing with the situation but was coordinating closely with local officials and the police. Although the ASG group holding Vagni is increasingly limited in its freedom of movement, and government troops have reportedly pinpointed Vagni's location in the jungle near Indanan town, Valenzuela hinted that a military operation against the terrorists still may not be possible at this time. He said that rough terrain and bad weather continue to hamper any rescue plans. Reliable sources report that there may be as many as 60 ASG terrorists in Vagni's vicinity, raising the risks to him of staging a military rescue. Ambassador Kenney reiterated to new Chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) General Victor Ibrado on May 7 that the U.S. remains concerned about Vagni's safe release.

13. (C) The Philippine National Red Cross says it has confirmed that hostage Eugenio Vagni is still alive but ill, and they are concerned that ongoing military operations would place him at risk. ICRC's head of operations for East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, Alain Aeschlimann, said May 1 that Vagni's safety and well-being remain the ICRC's main concern, and they are extremely worried about his health. Aeschlimann appealed to the ASG to release Mr. Vagni immediately and unconditionally. He added that the ICRC has never received a ransom demand for any of the three hostages and, as a matter of policy, the ICRC does not pay ransom when its workers are kidnapped, as that would endanger their ability to work in conflict zones. Aeschlimann told the media that the ICRC has asked all those involved in the crisis to avoid taking any action that would compromise Vagni's safety.

THE END GAME

14. (C) Given the release of Mary Jean Lacaba and the apparent abandonment of Andreas Notter, it is not clear what political ends the ASG hopes to achieve by continuing to hold Vagni, giving rise to the question of whether the kidnappers have another goal in mind. The Philippine government and ICRC have firm policies against paying ransom, but that does not preclude victims' families from doing so, and the Philippine media circulated unsubstantiated rumors that

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someone paid ransoms for Lacaba and Notter after their respective releases. The protracted negotiations and failure of the ASG to release Vagni conceivably could be the result of the inability of Vagni's family and friends to raise sufficient funds to purchase his freedom. Regardless of the ASG's motives, the primitive living conditions where Vagni is being held are clearly challenging for a man of his age and medical condition, and at some point he may become more of a liability than an asset. The kidnappers are no doubt aware that if Vagni is released, military and local authorities would likely conduct a major military offensive against them.

Various Philippine officials have told the Ambassador privately that the government wants to restore the confidence of the local populace in the government's ability to maintain peace and stability on the island and to prevent the ASG from perpetrating this kind of crime again. The ASG's continued holding of a sick hostage might be their way of delaying the end game of a full-scale military assault.

KENNEY